

COMMON DEED

Poems by

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*Now ordinary and alone in the afternoon,
I find this little circle of insects
Common as soot, clustering on dim stone,
Together with their warm secrets.*

*I think I am going to leave them folded
And sleeping in their slight gray wings.
I think I am going to climb back down
and open my eyes and shine.*

--James Wright

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I.

SEPTEMBER

You're doing nothing, then suddenly
there is your uncle with a club foot
and crippled hand, who loved sports
and wrote histories for children;
your father who shot the eyes off pool balls;
your boyhood friend who closed himself
inside the garage, motor running,
and went to sleep. I know a man who painted
his town the color of distant hills,
so stepping inside its shops and offices
was like entering a field of mint
or passing under forest light.
This month, on a calendar above the desk,
Japanese warlords have closed the bridge,
and the people must turn away from their temple.
There are times I've thought I was going to die,
but didn't. Tonight I'm here beneath the swords
that threaten to slice off the heads of faith.
There is a blue circle around the date of my birth.
I remember a woman who collected her past
like pieces of shell from the sand;
those glass beads of prayer
dangling from my mother's arthritic fingers;
the ragman, carriage, and horse,
peddling his iron and cloth. I think of a saint
who wore burlap, and spoke with rabbit and sparrow.
I know a man who listens to the hours
trapped in the throats of tiny wooden birds.
It's hard to tell from here, where the white bees
of my body have gathered, if memory
is sacrament or penance.

A CHRONOLOGY OF BIRDS

1951. Bored with magic shows
and lemonade stands, we needed
some deeper ceremony,
so when we found the crushed sparrow
by the roadside we stared
awhile, poked its body
with sticks, trembled a little
in our seven-year-old fascination.

Then I remembered Father's harmonica,
ran to the house and took it
from its shiny metal case.
Up and down the small town's street,
our procession of children marched;
one boy carrying the bird
and its death stench
on a small slab of bark.

I pressed my tongue to each fret,
blew, but made the wrong sound,
a dirge -- not that first language
of breath, song, and trill.
Meanwhile, there were birds
collecting in the trees.
We could only answer them
with silence.

INNOCENCE

I'm dressed inside the family album
for First Communion, pushing my tongue
against the fleshy space where a tooth had been,
and I love Mother and Father, Jesus
and the Blessed Virgin,
a girl in my second grade class
who yells at me for following her.
Look, I'm nearly forgivable
standing under a chorus of angels
in this white suit, even though
once, while reading aloud from *Black Beauty*,
I declared that horse's coat
to be "smooth as Satan,"
and so was held back a year
because, as the nun explained
later to my shamed parents,
I was a strange boy who could not read.

There's a fast-food restaurant
in place of the dining car
where Mother worked, photographs
of it framed in plastic on the wall.
And I remember a trucker
who promised me cowboy boots and hat,
but never drove through town again,
summers on the front porch
watching the Thruway being built,
reports of traffic fatalities
in the local gazette, my father
telling stories to the neighborhood kids,
making each, in turn, a hero,
six-guns drawn, riding a sleek stallion.

[stanza break]

INNOCENCE

I would save us all now, if I could,
from the herd of mistakes
galloping through our hearts.
Once, reshaping our lives
was an easy ritual of customized cars,
rolled-up sleeves, and petroleum jelly.
Then we left town,
or punched in at the factory.
Nothing was simple. No one was blameless.

MOUNTAIN OF LOVE

Saturday nights, we skated
to rock and roll music,
and weaved around girls.
In our songs
there was always someone
who needed love,
and would, like us,
do almost anything to get it.

That year,
we wore fluorescent pants
with a buckle on the back,
carefully folded sleeves
and slicked hair,
laced our boots half-way,
and spun on full-precision
wooden wheels, each turn
waiting like a first date.

Rhythms of Duane Eddy
and Johnny Rivers
propelled us through games
of whip and chicken,
where danger could be played
inside the wings of our collars,
each of us knowing
he'd circle back
to join the others.

[stanza break]

MOUNTAIN OF LOVE

It was not like now,
coming home from your job
on second shift,
your body aching
in ways it never did
at seventeen,
and you keep repeating
the wrong words
to some half-remembered lyric --
not from love, but need --
until you can almost believe
you are loosened
from that snapping line
your life has been.

PRACTICING FAITH

Mornings, Father walked me to church,
although he didn't share my mother's faith,
so I could become an altar boy and serve,
having learned whatever it is a child can know of sin,
and carefully memorized each necessary prayer,
and been told the names of each essential saint.

My father rose in the soft light like a saint,
afternoons in the pool hall, the men quiet as in church,
watching him bend over the green table in a kind of prayer,
as he lined up a shot and aimed with certain faith,
knowing a mistake in geometry to be the only sin.
Eye and hand, he believed, would always serve.

If I lost, say a coin, a book, and no memory would serve,
Mother took me through the house, repeating a request: "Dear Saint
Anthony, please come around." (Just now, I was without sin.)
"Something's lost and can't be found." Later, in church,
no matter what was not recovered, I would have faith,
kneel, and ask again, in silent, reverent prayer.

But I thought there was so much more than prayer,
or choosing different ways in which to serve.
I thought to question what I heard and saw a faith
to teach me what it meant to live simply as a saint.
I wondered at the many reasons for a church,
and brightly colored, numbered balls pocketed like sin

[stanza break]

PRACTICING FAITH

forgiven in the dark holes of a smoke-filled room, and why sin
was something I had to speak about in prayer.
Was hymn and chant the salvation of a church?
What did it really mean, to sacrifice and serve?
How is it I could be both pure and wrong, a saint?
Father's kindness, Mother's trust, was what I knew of faith.

Thinking of the hospital, I remember Mother's faith,
and the priest who came to baptize Father free from sin,
Father's breath a final wind to angel, man, or saint.
I listened to all we leave in death, and Mother's prayer,
and wanted to believe her voice alone would serve
to comfort as I joined the last procession through the church.

TODAY

Today is your lover, asleep
and dreaming the continuous fountain.
It is your body
dying without you.

It is the darkness
of distant trees
poised on the horizon,
like those strange shadows
of small animals
that danced across the moonlit ceiling
of your childhood.

It is a long-tailed kite,
or random bird.
It is a child
grasping the tenuous cord
of delight.

Today is the desire
of sudden rain, or it is you
driving through that rain,
not knowing the difference
between curved road and sky.

THE NECKTIE

Father wore a necktie, third shift,
cleaning machines at the factory, blue fabric
shimmering like a summer night on the drab gray
cotton twill uniform of common deed.
Often, since then, I've tied his double windsor,
dressing for funerals, a wedding, dinner,
some occasion involving a dark room, wine, good jazz.

I've been looking at this photograph of you and me
celebrating my last birthday at that Italian restaurant
we enjoy so much, yet hardly go to anymore,
now that we have a routine of monthly bills and simple utility.
But I'm thinking how light flashed like a star in the fingers
of the waitress who took the Polaroid shot
I'm holding, how genuine her happiness
seemed at what we all waited for,
how his smooth hand-over-hand motion
had perfectly drawn the floral-print knot.

AT THE HAMILTON HOUSE

In the garden, we try to guess
whatever's missing
from the statue of a woman
looking down at a falcon perched
on her cracked foot,
her arm raised,
her hand a memory
of stone,
certain as love.

What happens to anything,
once it's broken away?
We walk past
the veined, translucent leaves,
laid across the lawn
like a large hand,
to the garden's edge
where, frozen in sunlight,
a small gray bird has flown
onto the outstretched arms
of a stone figure
of a child.

Once, years ago
in another town,
after her mother and I divorced,
while I was walking
with my daughter,
tulips and roses
were blooming
in the suburban yards,
and she, a child
who wanted only

(continued)

AT THE HAMILTON HOUSE

to collect a few
of the world's colors,
ran toward them.

This afternoon, any leaf
could be your hand
on my breast.
Some days the world feels like that,
like we really belong
to the blue air
and voices in the garden.

THE BURNING

With winter on all the calendars,
I stand alone in a room,

at a window.
My face floats

beneath the many fires
of stars,

above rivers of salt.
Snow falls from my eyes,

and a few crows fly out of them.
Tonight, whatever I think

is marked by flame.
If it were not for the burning hands,

I would be an arsonist of regret,
and my desire

a blue nest of smoke.
This is how I must live

in the shadows of ice,
and what the storm is.

CHANCES

That poor, cloned sheep on the evening news,
old before its time;
a man, blind for thirty years,
sight restored; the infant lifted
from the incubator at the hospital ward
in Belgrade; my new marriage;
the cat rising from its primordial sleep.

Anything can happen: the wafer
of my dead mother floating like a leaf
across the late summer lawn;
crows resting on the maple
of my father's shoulder.
Who knows what to expect?

Each morning I step out to sun,
snow, rain, blizzard, or calm sea.
Here there is nothing
I can't believe.

THE NOTE

Like when you're inside a shopping mall,
I listen to birds chattering,
a kind of background music
you get used to,
but their song makes me strangely sad,
the way the extraordinarily beautiful
always will.

A teenager sits alone with a trumpet
on the top row of bleachers
at the edge of an empty football field,
his instrument returning his breath
with tuneless bursts.
He is like someone giving mouth-to-mouth
to the nearly drowned,
as I was years ago,
before I broke through the creek's surface,
and entered the world's loud opera.
That was the same place
my father and two uncles learned to swim,
when Grandfather tossed them in.
How often I watched
Father's sequined concert
of body and water -- silence.
My father played the violin
so badly when I was a small child,
if he took it out of the case,
I would scream uncontrollably.
Sometimes, the way we live
is a crazy orchestra
that we've all joined,
playing to beat the band.

(continued)

THE NOTE

But here's this kid,
who only requires the joy
of one sweet note,
and will try again and again,
until whatever it is he feels
can be finally lifted
into the brightness of voices and wings.

IN THE WOODS AT HILLS ACRES

In the woods behind the house, leaves
swirl and fold like envelopes,
carrying their brief messages of wind.

For half a century, I've been walking
somewhere. Once, on a crisp afternoon
like this, I entered a clearing

just in time to see a hunter
with his rifle raised and aimed at me,
an instant when not even the chirping

lyric code of sparrows, that insists
we belong to the world, can make the heart
believe it could be at the center of anything,

and I was like one of those creatures
in the forest that seems certainly doomed,
yet somehow trembles through its next breath.

As my lover left this morning
for work, I remembered loneliness -- a room in Boston,
traffic angry in the narrow street,

and a man getting off the bus
at Fargo, North Dakota, bewildered
in front of an abandoned train station, years ago.

COBALT

Here's an evening sky
to define the changing season,
as I drive toward the waterfront.
Earlier, at work, I was told
one of my clients is dying.
This led to a clinical discussion of how
he should die, and where, and once again
I cursed my inability to say "enough!"
I'm contemplating the sound
of foghorns at the harbor;
the drifting shadows of gulls;
the stalled, imported flowers
of the exotic garden;
the town's citizens walking through the park
in this time before the inevitable
coming of tourists and rollerbladers;
the dark wings of the heart.
Last night I said something selfish.
Although you are kind,
and will forgive me this, I'm afraid,
even after the most sincere penance,
one is never fully redeemed.
Nevertheless, I've stopped at a chic downtown shop
to buy a cobalt vase and single red rose.
Now, damnit, I'm remembering the Halloween afternoon
at the treatment center
he ran behind me like a child,
making little, harmless wind noises,
whispering, "I'm a ghost. Are you scared?"
I've forgotten when we began
collecting the blue glass,
but in our small apartment now, it's everywhere.

II.

MARTIN'S NURSING HOME

Black ladies in pink dresses walk and wheel
the dying into the solarium. A woman,
like someone recalling an adolescent love,
cannot name what she had for dinner,
but insists it was very good. A man points
at a bookcase, and claims he read every book
before he came here, then says, "But that's not
the whole story of my life." There's something
sinister about the way the dusty windows refuse
to allow winter light to enter the room.
This is a place where the old surrender the day
to a bite of forbidden candy, or a long,
heavenly pull from what may be the last cigarette.
Television announces the news above
their bowed heads and the cracked tile floor.
Afternoons, they wait in the cold, grave lobby
for the visitor that never comes, then reminisce
over the children who could have treated them well.
Once a month, there are two glasses of wine
in the basement, and the required dance.

THE MESSENGERS

Between here
and there,
the radio tuned
to my favorite rock station,
I'm all engine and song,
my hands two birds
of determined flight.

Consider the complaint
of jay and wind,
the persistence of squirrel,
the burden of walnut,
the curse of dead leaves
on my windshield,
then the hours
of work I'm driving toward.

At each turn and stop
I wonder what it means --
this daily migration
of commuter and trucker,
schoolchild and police,
jogger and transient;
the punctuation
of blinking lights
and stalled traffic.

Tonight in the yard
with my tired eyes,
the grass wet
under my yellow leaves,
a ballet of light

(continued)

THE MESSENGERS

dances around me,
and above my head
birds repeat
the day's small thoughts.

But, just now,
on the elm branches,
those dark mystics,
the crows,
wearing their black capes,
their heads bowed
in the sudden gray air,
tell me everything
I'll need to learn.

TOWARD WINTER

I'm remembering a season of crows,
an explosion of leaves,
construction of a nest.

For some time now,
you've been tracking
the strategy of a particular squirrel,
worrying it will forget
the hazelnuts and almonds
we tossed on the fire-escape,
now that they're hidden
under hemlock and elm,
beneath tortured hydrangea.

The neighbor across the street
is drunk and yelling again.
He stands coatless,
furious in December chill,
pounding his fists on his door,
demanding the woman he beats
let him in.

I know the police will come soon,
talk to the woman,
reason with the man,
then drive away
in a flashing blue glow
toward someone else's scream.

[stanza break]

TOWARD WINTER

We feed the squirrel.
We remember the crow.
We accumulate the sticks
of desire:

build them into something
we can live with.

SUNDAY EVENING AT THE STARDUST CAFE

Young people smoke cigarettes,
drink coffee, flirt. A strip of violet
neon tubing thrusts from between the breasts
of Marilyn Monroe in a black and white poster
on the wall. On the jukebox, Neil Young
sings: "Old man, look in my eyes."
Maybe I'll join them, promise to be quick
and reckless. The young blonde
with startling eyes, that seem to reflect
everything, will take me to a quiet booth
in back, where we'll smoke and talk,
as if we're really interested in the bad art
hanging next to us. I can explain then
why my life's important. I remember Marilyn,
her mascaraed, lidded eyes, Presley
censored on Sullivan, Lennon in New York
that night at the Dakota.
Why shouldn't she fall in love?

But I don't want to say too much.
For instance, I can't tell her how sad
the silver-hooped ring dangling from her nose
makes me feel, in spite of my own gold earring.
These kids look like Rimbaud, and far as I know,
they probably are. Think of it, a dozen
reincarnated Rimbauds in a greasy spoon,
pale and dressed in black, notebooks open
to pages ready to record whatever's wrong.

[stanza break]

SUNDAY EVENING AT THE STARDUST CAFE

I remember a film, "Wild in the Streets."
The President of the United States,
a rock musician, twenty-five and aging fast,
whose platform was built on the premise
that anyone over twenty-one was suspect,
contemplates his life. In the final frame,
a ten-year-old boy faces the camera
and promises a future of bubble-gum and baseball,
but like with anything else, there's a catch.

Back at the Stardust, the waitress,
who is friendly, brings my sandwich.
An old woman mutters, squints at the menu,
and counts her change. Tourists ride
horse-drawn carriages clapping down
the brick streets, or dance on the deck
of a cruise ship entering the harbor.
The kids take their notebooks and leave.

THE COMMUTER

It hardly seems worth it, to live,
I mean, so far away from work.
The woman on the bus sitting
next to me shakes off her sleep.
A man enters his life's equations
onto the eerie green glow
of a lap-top computer. Behind me,
a woman talks incessantly
through her phobia of silence.
The driver plays morning news.
I prefer the one most libelous newspaper.
My life then is somehow honest. This week
has been downsizing and a failed deal.
Yesterday, in the office, I swear
I almost wept. At night I screamed
awake from a dream of cats with
horrible human faces. 3:00 a.m.,
our cat was crying for its food.
I don't know why I want it all
to last -- this job that has me
traveling sixty miles, my restrained
and modest marriage, the kids' good
grades in school, even the baby's
relentless need. Still,
every day I join the anonymous walk
from one office building to another,
then rise and return from the city's
slow burn and smoke. Lately, I imagine
instead of stopping at our towns,
we keep traveling together until we become
the only world we know, like one of those

(continued)

THE COMMUTER

lost expeditions of arctic explorers
who, when discovered after years
of ingenuity and survival, no longer
devour each other from hunger,
but for the ritual.

SMOKE

I'm thinking about the weightlessness
of certain things at this coffee shop:
memory, steam, regret, future.
But then there's that film
I saw last night:
a writer whose wife was killed
in a drive-by shooting
tells the story of how Sir Walter Raleigh
took a set of scales,
placed a cigar on one, the ashes
of a smoked cigar on the other,
and calculated the difference
as the weight of the human soul.
But it's hard to measure
the feelings of the characters
in that movie: the cigar store owner
who's been photographing
the same street corner every day
for more than twenty years;
the writer who, while looking at the photographs,
sees his wife, alive and crossing
the busy street;
the one-eyed wife of the store owner;
the ex-convict with a prosthetic arm;
the boy waiting on a curb
for the father he's never met.
And what about the equation
of those two small children spinning
on vinyl-covered stool seats just now?
I watch them turn, stop,
then turn again.

(continued)

SMOKE

One says, "scissors."
The other says, "rock."
The first spins three times,
smiles, says, "paper."
The second cocks his thumb,
points a forefinger,
makes a clicking noise
and says, "You're dead."

EIGHT BALL

There's a Buddha on my desk,
and he's laughing.
We of the West believe
if you rub the Buddha's belly,
good fortune is certain.
But none of this matters
tonight at the pool hall,
here with a friend --
his shrewd eye and steady hand.
Again, my shot
misses its intention,
and I'm moving inevitably
toward some final chance.

The Buddha was a gift
from my wife.
I believe she meant it
to point out the way
to be different from the self
is to be the self.

For example, the sly
yet generous-hearted manner
with which my friend approaches
the green table and stands,
for a moment,
like a Chinese monk
meditating at the edge
of a quiet field,
is exactly who he is.

[stanza break]

EIGHT BALL

He understands
what's important
is more than knowing
what will happen next;
that paying attention
is how we come to the small globe
about to spin away from us,
and call it "safe."

ALL OUR QUICK DAYS

I'm at it again, my old routine
of going places I don't want to be,
because this is what the world
of subways and bank accounts expects.
Overhead, silent messages
of disaster and warning flash
across a computerized screen.
Somewhere in Japan, the car I'm waiting for
was built, the stops I'll make in Boston
recorded in Chicago.
It's no wonder I'm confused.
I tell you, we're not ready for this.
Think about the masturbating monkeys
in a zoo. Years ago, someone homeless
and drunk said to me, "Desire
deferred sickens the heart."
My sick heart trembles now,
and climbs under the artificial suns
of all our quick days.
The purgatory of our troubled sleep
is why I don't take naps.
Instead, I'm sitting with a book open,
pen and paper on the table,
television sound turned off,
not really sure of what I'm doing,
and so look up at the babies being held
underwater by smiling adults
whose heads are nodding in the breathable air,
and although I can't hear an explanation,
I know it has to do with this theory
that fish, frog, infant, and corpse
are all connected,
and it's only time that separates us
from the submerged children.

THE STATION

*I could not help but cry.
The train, it left the station,
two lights on behind.
Well, the blue light was my blues,
the red light was my mind.*

--Robert Johnson

And all the sadness you feel
is vibrating in the hands
of the musician by the window,
a line of traffic driving through
the rain-streaked light reflected
in the sheen of his guitar,
and that locomotive, his heart,
traveling farther
than it should have gone,
is suddenly derailed.

Earlier tonight, in a cold rain,
a man sat on the sidewalk
in front of a shop.
You tell the woman
you're with it's all right --
someone will take care of him.

So now the musician is clutching his chest.
His large, gleaming body
staggers and bends forward,
conversations at the tables
fade like the last notes of a song.

[stanza break]

THE STATION

The bass player brings him water,
he swallows the pill
he's removed from his pocket,
and it's like everyone
in the room is only alive
to hear him.

The drummer with the snakeskin hatband
lays down his sticks
like a shaman laying down bones,
until the man whose heart
will always hurt can begin again.

COMMUNAL

Desire is the cold
nose of a squirrel
shoveling snow
on the fire-escape,
the turn of a sleepless lover.
Crows are black tongues
on bare branches.
Traffic is love moving
in and out of romance.
Twice a week, the parking lot
at the funeral parlor fills,
and each day the same drunk
stumbles to the corner store.

Now the bells
of the Baptist church,
the loud neighbors
and their children,
the horns of ships
in the harbor,
the gray afternoon
and late mail.
Waiting for you
to come home for dinner,
I think how we belong
to this community
of insomniacs and the dead,
and how that guy falling
toward his next six-pack
is more than a little like us,

[stanza break]

COMMUNAL

the way he just wants
some time to forget,
and a place he can lie
inside a bottle, like a ship.
Yesterday, 2:00 a.m.,
in that film
about the Titanic,
passengers sang
as it went down
and those who would be saved
held one another
in their small boats,
and listened.

MONARCH

We're sitting here in summer green
of the back yard, like a couple
of ancient Chinese governors,
wise with drink and conversation,
when you interrupt our talk of loneliness,
bad jobs, money, lost children,
to say, "That's beautiful!"

And it is -- a gold and black Monarch
waving between leaves,
underneath a young maple.
I believe this is sacred,
to witness a moment in the brief hours
of life of such a thing.

This is also a good time to speak
about passion, or contemplate
Li Po, who writes:
"One quick trip between
heaven and earth, then the dust
of ten thousand generations."

POEM FOR RICHARD HUGO

I. Montana Rescue Mission

If we sang the hymns and prayed, we ate
the poor meal. At night, women rose in our sleep
like angels of childhood, children laughed,
and money blessed our palms. When we woke,
no women floated through the dank stench
of rotting mattresses. If children laughed,
they gnashed their teeth and jeered. Any brand
of cigarette was a currency we could believe.
Mornings in the tan air and dust, we sat looking
at the earth which bore us, and tried to think
of simple ways to save our lives. In that alley
behind the blue stucco mission, we knew "Eternity Now"
said there was no hope. Wind from the plains
swirled heat over our failures, and each day
lingered homeless. If mountains mattered,
they pointed a permanent direction to a heaven
we couldn't see. When we sang, our voices cracked.
When we prayed, we didn't mean it.

II. Believing It Is So

Believe in a voice of stone,
then listen for its one true sound,
echo of water. Names are what we live by.
Call the world forever.
Believe this is so because
you have made certain it will go on.
Remember the woman who haunts the river?

(continued)

POEM FOR RICHARD HUGO

The sand in your throat is her last song,
and trout run every spring. Summer
in Montana you were dying. I could not
see you. I turned east like a plains Indian
hunting mystic truth. Missoula to Billings
I wandered, telling sacred skies "It's wrong."
Black nights on the prairie, unseen and evil
creatures made their terrible noises. Antelope
soared over fields at dawn, horses
raced through mountain wind, and mothers
fed their sons. We need a spirit
water won't offend, and a covenant:
Be kind. Live your life as if it were
a promise you had to keep, or die.

III.

SILVER LAKE

The first time I saw it, I was
five-years-old, and every day
there the sun exploded
into bright red strawberries
Mother fed us with sweet milk,
while Father swam the cool morning.

Afternoons, I would walk along
the shore, stop and bend to the glitter
of the lake, as he stood, just
close enough, in the white sand.

Our summer trips to the cottage
always began with a slow drive
in Uncle's '49 gray Pontiac.
Year after year, at the end
of vacation, he returned
to bring us home. We went,
not sure that's what we wanted.

I live in a city I didn't know
about then. My father and uncle
are both dead. Mother writes
often from the nursing home,
and I remember the shine of trout
beneath rippling pools.

1954: TWO PARADES

Just home from Korea, a decorated war hero was leaning
toward the crowd, from the hotel's third floor,
and we heard the drum roll, marching band,
rifle-fire in the humid air, Mother and I,
while Father worked the late shift.

Didn't I know what war was,
times in the weeds I waited for the enemy?
Little Bobby lost an eye in one of those battles,
shot out by his own brother's pellet gun.
I remember, all those childhood years after,
his glass-marble stare seemed wrong,
and his brother's self-hatred.

That was the summer the daughter of the kind woman
who owned the dining car my mother washed dishes in
became Miss New York State, in a parade of lace
and lilacs, their petals the pale lavender
of a heart on the breast of a graceless uniform,
or the satin that ten years later would line my father's casket.
We all stood cheering on the street
to wave along the beauty we were not.

THE CONTEMPLATIVE

Some days he just doesn't know
what he's doing, why he cares
about changes in weather
or his next birthday,
which will make him older
than his dead uncle.

But there are times
he really feels part of it all,
responsible, as if someone
were secretly watching him,
and he is so full of love
for everything he cannot speak,
or he talks incessantly to himself,
asking rhetorical questions
about the rain and trees.

He likes to take walks
to the harbor, let the river
channel through him awhile,
buy an expensive cup of coffee
to go from a downtown shop,
sit around and look
at everyone else's life
stepping quickly across the crowded streets.

In his study,
the room where he writes
the other story of his life,
when things are suddenly quiet
and even the storm inside his brain
has receded to a light fog,

(continued)

THE CONTEMPLATIVE

he stares out the west window at dusk,
as if his mind were a hand
that could lower the sun,
and bless the sky with many colors.

ARBORETUM

The sun is a tumor
threatening our conversation.
Just now we're discussing
the possibilities of Zen,
the acceptance of everything,
the paradox of burlap
and sainthood.
We decide art
also has its place
in the world,
even as young hoodlums
in hi-tops are clustered
near bushes and trees,
like an exotic species of flora.

It's that kind of day
someone must have already painted,
and we are these two figures
made up of so many
colored dots,
distinguished from the landscape
by an artificial splash
of light.
But don't we really need
to be here like this,
thinking of our fathers,
the tattooed forearm,
sure stroke of a cue?
And what about our mothers,
their cumulus lips
floating in the spring air?

[stanza break]

ARBORETUM

Listen friend,
no matter what we make of things,
their details are always hidden,
like the songs
of those nameless birds
we never see.
It's like returning
to the difficult passage
of a book,
or standing in a roomful of flowers
with the body of someone
you might have loved once.
Let's study its pale, folded hands,
the heart gone gray.
Let's study the mysterious trees,
and the impossible names
we give them.

MY FATHER'S NAME

Twenty years dead, and still Mother
calls me by his name,
which is a river,
ebb of sea marsh,
mussels and kelp.
It is the lesser heron
and least sandpiper.
It is silt and sea grass,
badger and eel.

Say it again,
it becomes waves
repeating themselves
against the pilings.
It is curve of riverbank.
It is the closed factory
and abandoned houses.
It is a gathering of clouds.

My father's name is a bridge
crossing a river
where a man and son fish
near willows bending
over the murky water
like heads hung in prayer,
and light is a sound
only the dead can hear.

1948

Everything seemed forever then:
the long, dull day before the bell released
us all from school, the pastor's Sunday sermon,
the high arc of a fly ball, Grandmother's gossip,
my father's sucked-in breath when I'd done something wrong,
a tough kid's punch coming straight at me, a car swerving
toward my big, lumbering dog, and how she stumbled
across the road that morning, to die.

I believed those men in gray wool suits,
and women in floppy, wide-brimmed hats
ornamented with artificial fruit and flowers,
who rushed back and forth in the nineteen forties
RKO newsreels, bodies jerking like marionettes,
actually moved that way in "real life,"
and imagined my own adulthood, important enough
to have mysterious places I would hurry to.

And I remember clips of beauty queens, generals,
animals made to do strange and funny things,
a pilot leaping from the plane that failed the test,
earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, explosions,
then walking out to the startling afternoon light,
confused at first by the town's slow motion.

CHLOE'S EPISTEMOLOGY

Bored with the world,
my granddaughter grows restless.
Five-months-old
already she wants the grass
to define itself,
the clouded sky
to explain the wind, she wants
the neighbor's barking dog
struggling at the end of a chain
to swallow its vocabulary.

I promise her eternal bloom
of yellow columbine and primrose.
I think she is telling me
to name the world
is only part of that story.
For instance,
say the word "divorce."
Notice its syllables,
how they insist
on remaining together.
I know there is half-a-century
between us,
and an inexplicable, perpetual
distance. Still,
isn't it truth enough
we are here now,
at the edge of this small,
deathless flowering?

MEDITATIONS ON LEAVING

Neruda, as a child in the yard,
and his precious toy lamb,
spoke for hours
with an unseen boy
on the other side
of a high wooden fence,
until one day
he passed the lamb
under a hole they had dug,
and that boy
delivered *his* favorite thing --
a pine cone.
It was like any moment
when we are almost innocent.

Once, a friend and I
ran to the river
and broke the backs of sunfish
against wet rocks,
smoked from corncob pipes,
cut our arms with the knife
of our dangerous games,
and pressed the small wounds
together like a kiss.

I still don't know
how it is we become
what we no longer trust,
but this morning
before I left, I watched
your face turn away
toward whatever, just then, was.

GRACE

I wake, remembering it's been years
since I've lived alone.
Did I tell you, once I spent hours
listening to the solitude of snow?
Yesterday, I watched death take the last
leaves from the elm branches, and thought
about the desire of rock and weed.
I drove to the harbor then, the confusion
of seabirds, children tossing bread crumbs
into the gray winter air, and stood by the pier
looking out at endless shimmer and wave.
This is what the body so often comes to:
awkward gesture and grace. Last night
we made love, held each other and slept.
I believe the dreams we don't recall
are the reason we rise each day
as ourselves, and go on. We've been
to the burial grounds, names etched in slate,
the park and its child frozen at the fountain.
We've collected small stones and feathers
from the shore. Autumn in the flower garden,
bees have repeated your name inside my throat.
When I speak with you now, horses arrive
at the marketplace, their carriages silent.
What I have to say is no more than the rain.

THE MAPLE

I've never felt a sadness
such as that afternoon I drove home
to find the maple
chopped in sections strewn
across the yard like victims
of a highway accident.

From our third-story window
even the intrusive jay
and ominous crow
had been welcome.
You worried
over the squirrel
in winter.
Once, a single cardinal
was our only hope.

And there were times
we talked into evening
beneath its foliage,
sheltered
from light summer rains.

First, our neighbor built a wall
for privacy, then complained
some coastal storm
would crash the tree
onto her careful lawn.

[stanza break]

THE MAPLE

Yesterday, we drank wine
with friends
to celebrate the maple,
and looking out
at its bright absence,
someone suggested
this was a good thing:

we could see
the peaked rooftops now,
the turn-of-the-century
houses up the hill.

NOCTURNE

What is the universe
comprised of, if not this
neighborhood, its fixed place
in things, like some star
we've been looking at our whole lives;
small satellites of birds
attending the possibility of weather;
one birdsong becoming another,
like an accumulation of light
from many stars;
the arrival, every Friday,
of a single rose
at the coffee table;
the cosmic clink
of bottles and cans
collected in the shopping carts
of sadness and hope
the homeless drive through the dark
each week;
the incredible black hole
of all our feelings?
And I'm thinking how,
in the quiet
after a late evening meal,
I watched your fingers move
in slow circles around the rim
of an empty wine glass,
which sang,
just then, like a galaxy.

AT THE HARBOR

The nearly stilled water
is clear enough to see
silt settling
beneath rippling mountains
and clouds.

Cormorants float
like so many question marks,
and pigeons rise
like conflicting thoughts.

Yellow-eyed gulls watch
as I toss in a stone
that disappears
like a monk's answer
to a novitiate.

Look at my hands.
If it weren't
for a particular loop
in a certain genetic code,
they could be birds
flying through spring rain.

But aren't we small boats
sailing each day
into another circumstance
of weather?

SEASONAL

From the riverbank's early dark,
I bring you feldspar, quartz, speckled stone.
All week we have been startled
by chill and rain, the wet wind,
frantic search of squirrels,
how leaves of elm and maple
glisten and drop from their branches.
We can hear ships pull away
from the harbor, smell the sea
going out.

Tonight I sit beside the cat's smooth engine,
knowing before long
you'll come home from work
wanting only me, a little moon
through the skylight, some wine;
when we'll lie down for a while
without speaking, our bodies
gathering like winter clouds,
and we will rise like small birds,
into the first delicate falling of snow.

PARTICULAR HEARTS

*. . . Love allows us to walk
in the sweet music of our particular heart.*

--Jack Gilbert

I walk to the edge of the pier,
where curious tourists point out
a single harbor seal, bobbing and lunging
in the cold winter water,
wet, brown fur slick as sex.
Here is where we've come to be astonished.
"This can't be happening to me,"
we say when things go wrong.
We wonder about the seal,
what it's doing down there,
imagine webbed feet propelling
the impossibly large body
with great speed, toward some inevitable,
glittering fish. This is the chain:
we devour, restore. Today
you and I argued, but when I returned
from seeing all this,
our particular hearts tapped
against a blue door, joined
in the necessary, exquisite surge
toward separate places on our sweat-soaked bedding,
a river of twisted sheets wrapped around our ankles,
our two hearts taking up a constant rhythm
inside their respective rooms.
So many things make us think of our lives.
Isn't that what love is?
Like this morning, in the trees,
when swallows became flash and trill,
and I wanted you here, to listen.

SELLING THE CHURCH

The cold river behind me,
I walked home through a light falling of snow
and epiphany of wind,
past a blessing of Baptist church bells,
and thought how, when I was a boy,
houses of faith seemed eternal
as the soul we children knew
would someday rise from our shocked eyes.
But what did we know then about salvation?
That first year of marriage, I came to understand
my father, who each Sunday knelt in a pew
at Mother's church, although it was a place
he had no faith in. Months later, again
at the church on my street, I'm remembering this
as I read the realtor's sign: "Sale Pending."
Between maple and pine, birds cross
in a religion of weather. What we believe to be true
is what the caretaker raking the leaves
of the minister's yard suddenly says to me:
"Snow tonight. Frost on t.v."
It's the gray river and waves against wharf pilings;
the harsh cries of circling gulls and the harbor's silence;
the ritual of a pouring of wine and quiet speech
that is our desire, our prayer.